

VZCZCXRO0468
PP RUEHCN RUEHGH RUEHVC
DE RUEHBJ #3546/01 2550926
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 110926Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIJING
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9906
INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 003546

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/11/2033
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PROP](#) [KOLY](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: GOLD MEDAL HAUL SPARKS MEDIA DEBATE ABOUT STATE
SPORTS SYSTEM

REF: OSC CPP20080823968052

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson
for reasons 1.4 (B/D).

Summary

1. (C) The lukewarm reaction of many Chinese to the home team's take of 51 gold medals at the Beijing Summer Olympics, according to several contacts, stems from ambivalence over the non-mainstream sports in which the Chinese Olympians excelled and dissatisfaction with China's continuing poor performance in higher-profile sports such as basketball, soccer, track and field and swimming. As the Olympics were drawing to a close, China's media started a lively debate over the costs of China's state-dominated training system, with several publications noting that the obsession with medals has hampered the development of mass participation in athletics. One magazine argued that the network of sports academies, where the overwhelming number of students will never make the cut for the Olympics, is producing scores of under-educated ex-athletes with few job skills. On September 6, the People's Daily ran an interview with State Sports Administration Director Liu Peng, who said China will "uphold and perfect" the state sports system. One journalist told us this signaled that the Government is trying to shut down the debate over China's medal machine. Several contacts cited the Chinese public's positive reception of U.S. women's volleyball coach Lang Ping, who once played for China, as demonstrating that a more "mature," less nationalistic view of sports is taking hold among Chinese fans. End summary.

Going for Gold (in obscure sports at great expense)

2. (C) For many Chinese, the pride of pulling off a successful Olympics with no major security incidents exceeds satisfaction over winning the gold medal count, according to numerous contacts. China won 51 gold medals (versus 32 in Athens and 28 in Sydney), the most won by any country at the Beijing Games. Pro-democracy scholar Liu Junning (protect) of the Cathay Institute for Public Affairs said average Chinese have not greeted the gold medal count with great enthusiasm. As evidence, Liu noted that the Chinese Government arranged for China's gold medalists to visit Hong Kong ahead of the September 7 legislative elections there, yet no such tour has been organized in the Chinese mainland. Liu and other contacts we spoke with said this muted reaction reflects public ambivalence toward the mostly non-mainstream sports where Chinese Olympians excelled. "We won all these golds in shooting," Liu told PolOff,

"but nobody in China owns a gun. However, everyone owns a bicycle yet we can't win a medal in cycling." (Note: Out of 54 medals available in cycling events, China took one bronze in women's track cycling.) Wu Yin (protect), Vice President of the public opinion polling firm Horizon, argued that, in addition to feeling little connection to sports such as archery, Chinese are quickly adopting a view, already prevalent in the developed world, that Olympic medals are more a reflection of individual athletic achievement than a symbol of national pride. The importance average Chinese place on Olympic medals, Wu asserted, is much lower than it was in the 1980s and 90s, and the propaganda value to the Party of Olympic success is thus falling.

13. (C) In the days following the Olympics Closing Ceremony August 24, a wide-variety of contacts expressed satisfaction with China's medal winnings but simultaneously downplayed the achievement. When PolOff asked Wang Dequan (protect), a historian at the Beijing Press and Publication Bureau, for his reaction to China's 51 gold medals, Wang shrugged, saying it was only natural for China to do well during the Games since it had the home field advantage. Xinjiang University engineering student Guan Renfeng (protect) was likewise unimpressed by the medal count, commenting to PolOff that while China won the most gold medals, it failed to achieve much success in "major" sports like track and field and basketball. Cheng Mingxia (protect), an editor at the Economic Observer, said she found distasteful the official

BEIJING 00003546 002 OF 003

media's excessive focus on the medal count during the Games.

Rethinking the State Sports Machine

14. (U) Just as China's state sports system was achieving its greatest success, China's media launched a pointed debate over the costs and benefits of government-dominated athletics. Much of the media criticism has focused on the elitist nature of sport in China and the lack of grass-roots programs for ordinary people. In an August 23 commentary, the China Daily, China's official English-language newspaper, said "the rich harvest (of medals) should not blind us to the gap between our Olympics prominence and less impressive mass involvement in sporting activities." An August 25 editorial in the Economic Observer praised the U.S. system, in which "government funds for sports are mainly spent on schools and communities," and urged the Chinese Government to "change its policy of monopolizing competitive sports." The cover story of the August 27 edition of Nanfeng Chuang ("Southern Window," a publication of the Guangzhou Daily Group) magazine predicted that the 2008 Olympics will mark the beginning of the end of China's state-dominated sports system. The article comments that between 1979 and 2003 China spent RMB 190 billion (USD 28 billion) on sports facilities (not including venues for the 2008 Olympics) that mostly sit empty. At least 90 percent of the athletes who enter the state sports system are eventually cut, the article added, resulting in legions of under-educated ex-athletes being left without adequate job skills. "The state sports system, built upon the waste of money and talent, is already like an arrow at the end of its flight," the magazine pronounced, "and its continued development is already unsustainable." (Note: By some estimates, 400,000 youth are training at state athletics academies.)

15. (C) Journalism contacts said that propaganda authorities have tolerated this debate because leaders generally do not view sports as a particularly sensitive topic. Chen Hao (protect), the Editor-in-Chief of the International Herald Leader, a Xinhua News Agency international affairs newspaper, said the debate is largely driven by concerns among journalists and intellectuals about the huge expense of China's vast network of sports schools and training facilities. Wang Wen (protect), an editor at the People's Daily-owned Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao), said many Chinese resent the special privileges granted to top athletes, especially reserved slots at top universities. (Note: In 2005, 2004 Olympic gold medalist hurdler Liu Xiang was accepted as a doctoral candidate in sports management by East China Normal University. According to the China Daily, the university arranged for instructors to give Liu one-on-one tutoring at his training center. Some Internet posters at the time criticized the fact that Liu, unlike ordinary students, could enter graduate school without sitting for any exams.) Wang said his own brother was sent to a county-level state sports academy as a potential shot-putter when he was 10 years old. Wang said his parents soon pulled his brother out of the program because it was "too brutal."

Liu Peng: State System Will Continue

16. (C) The People's Daily September 6 ran an interview with State Sports Administration Director Liu Peng, who said China would "uphold and perfect" (jianchi he wanshan) the state sports system. Liu said government leadership of sports is the best way for "a developing country like China" to concentrate the resources necessary to be internationally competitive. Liu refuted arguments made in China's media that every gold medal cost Chinese taxpayers hundreds of millions of RMB. The State Sports Administration's RMB 880 million (USD 130 million) annual budget for 2004 (Liu did not offer figures for more recent years) was not only spent on competitive sports, but also represented funding for mass sport programs plus salaries and benefits for 5,000 employees at work in the athletics system. Lu Yuegang (protect), a journalist at the China Youth Daily, told PolOff September 8 that Liu's

BEIJING 00003546 003 OF 003

interview was a signal to China's media that the debate over the government's role in sports is now over. Wang Dequan of the Beijing Press and Publishing Bureau predicted that China will eventually reform its Olympics machine and allow more private-sector participation in sports development, but such changes will be done gradually. Wang said the experience of men's soccer, where the development of a commercial professional league in China failed to improve the performance of the national squad in international competition, has made many average sports fans skeptical that more private sector involvement will necessarily translate into success in Olympic competition.

In Praise of Lang Ping

17. (C) When asked to comment on the political and social significance of the Games themselves, multiple interlocutors pointed to the positive reception given to U.S. women's volleyball coach Lang Ping. A search of Internet chatrooms revealed that some posters considered Lang a "traitor" (and there is evidence that net portals censored some of the more vitriolic comments), while just as many netizens defended Lang,

with some pointing out that China also relies on foreign coaches. Tsinghua University international relations scholar Sun Zhe (protect) told PolOff August 29 that most Chinese fans felt pride that the U.S. women won silver under Lang Ping, a former player and coach for China. (Note: Lang Ping coached the United States to a narrow victory over China in the preliminaries.) Sun said this favorable view of Lang Ping would have been "unimaginable" even a few years earlier when Chinese who went to play or coach for foreign teams were universally denounced as traitors. Sun said this reflected a new confidence and maturity in Chinese society, one that bodes well for China's continued integration into the international community.

RANDT